

AIDS lecture September 18, 1987

Address

By

C Everett Koop, MD, ScD  
Surgeon General  
Of the  
U.s. Public Health Service  
Deputy Assistant Secretary of Health  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Presented to the Center for Population Options  
Caucus for Producers, Writers, and Directors  
Los Angeles, California  
September 18, 1987

---

It was 9 days since I last spoke publicly about AIDS.

One evening when I was returning on a flight from Los Angeles to Washington, I sat next to a gentleman who was obviously in the television and movie business, because all he did was read scripts. We got into a conversation during dinner and he knew who I was, but I didn't have that advantage. I did tell him that I thought that there ways that Hollywood and the Public Health Service could work together for the health of America, and I wished that I had the opportunity to talk to writers, and producers on television and tell them some of my concerns. He said, "I could arrange that for you." We then talked about how that might be done. When we landed in Washington, he shook my hand and said, "I'm Norman Lear." The reason I tell that story is that I'm not sure how much of it went into the invitation that I had to give that particular address. There were approximately 90 people present, and they represented everyone I wanted to talk to in the world of television and movie entertainment.

I introduced this AIDS talk by referring to our concerns, then clarifying that by saying I was not using the royal "we", but that it was "you and I-together".

I made my initial and fundamental pitch immediately by saying that for many of our young people the entertainment industry is the primary sex educator. Your stories, said I, and characters influence their sexual attitudes, their values, and their behavior. And therefore, the country needs Hollywood's assistance; without it we cannot win the fight against AIDS.

Marcy Kelly who was representing Hollywood to me in this endeavor had sent me the videos of "An Early Frost", "An Enemy Among Us", and episodes of L.A. Law and St. Elsewhere. I felt they clearly demonstrated Hollywood's ability to present the AIDS issue in an informing, moving, and sensitive way.

I have said before in this archive that I had great respect for the manner in which the press delivered the facts about this very difficult and mysterious disease to the public for

eight long years. I took this occasion to repeat that, although, the eight years were not yet up.

I proved my point by quoting some research done by Columbia University that showed, “Between June 1983 and August 1986, the percentage of the population who said that they had heard or read about AIDS increased from 77 per cent to 99 per cent.” But then even better than that they said: “There are virtually no differences among demographic categories in the percentage of those aware of AIDS...media coverage appears to have obliterated the ‘awareness gap’ between population subgroups.”

These researchers looked at the joint surveys done by ABC and the New York Daily News and the Washington Post, by CBS and the New York Times, and by NBC and the Wall Street Journal, as well as surveys done by Roper, Lou Harris, Gallup and others. I took the opportunity to specifically thank the Los Angeles Times for its consistent and accurate coverage of this difficult topic over the past 6 years.

I indicated that I was pleased to read in the newspapers that writers and producers were taking the sexual contents of their programs into consideration relative to AIDS. That pleased me greatly and I said I would cover in the next few minutes, two issues that we see only in dim outline in the darkness ahead. Obviously, I hoped that the audience could bring these issues to the public in ways which government never could.

The first issue was directly related to the primary way that AIDS had been transmitted thus far and that gave me the opportunity to go into the homosexual, bisexual, heterosexual transmission of AIDS. Our experience indicated that homosexual and bisexual men were assuming a higher degree of responsibility for sexual behavior, but the appearance of adult heterosexual transmission of AIDS was a sobering event. That means that the problem is everyone’s sexual behavior...everybody’s ability to handle the phenomenon of their own human sexuality.

My concern was to let this audience know that we must learn or relearn that there is much more to human relationships than just “good sex”. I stated that if that audience believed otherwise then they should prepare themselves for the worst, because the most devastating fatal disease in recent times – AIDS – is now being transmitted from one person to another mainly through sex – that is, vaginal intercourse as well as anal intercourse.

I reminded the audience that the STDs, gonorrhea, syphilis, chlamydia were on the rise in young people and we did have a measure of their sexual activity in the 1,000,000 unplanned pregnancies in teenagers last year. For AIDS there was no antibiotic and there was no vaccine, and neither was on the horizon.

I had the temerity to tell this group that they could illustrate what I was concerned about by having their characters talk openly about sex. I used an example of what I called “condomania”. They had the ability to make condoms a part of normal sexual activity and to do it in good taste. I asked that they stress mutually respectful and

thoughtful...loving and caring relationships. In such relationships, there would most definitely be sex, but it would be without exploitation. It's sex without fear and domination. It's also sex without syphilis, gonorrhea and guilt. And it's sex without AIDS. I was using my language and I told them I knew they could do better because they already had, and I gave examples. I then shifted to the second issue that I said I would cover and that was race. That was the opportunity to go into the disproportionate prevalence of AIDS in Black and Hispanic people and gave statistics about heterosexual males, women, and babies born with AIDS and the racial percentages for minorities were frighteningly high.

I stressed the Blacks statistics; I said that the statistics were proportionately almost as bad for Hispanics.

This was a segue into the transmission of AIDS by the sharing of paraphernalia in the shooting of drugs intravenously. Here, I made it clear that clean needles would not stop this sequellae of addiction, murders, suicide and a range of diseases, but they might at least contain the spread of AIDS.

I was extremely frank and said, "If we continue to go back to the same low-risk, white, middle-class, and predominately suburban audience with AIDS prevention, we might be keeping that low-risk group low-risk, but we have to be reaching the other population that is high-risk: inner city Blacks and Hispanics. The need is urgent."

I also talked about one of the worse episodes of discrimination in our country, the little Ray brothers and their family in Arcadia, Florida: denied access to public education, shunned, their home burned to the ground. Although, they had national publicity, I could tell them of other cases that remained hidden from the public scrutiny.

My point in that was to ask them to stress the message that, "You cannot catch AIDS by casual contact". They could help America gain its senses, find its heart, and regain its soul.

The question and answer period was brisk and at times confrontational. There seemed to be those in the audience that resented my assumption that we in health could use the entertainment world to help get across our health messages. One particular person was adamant about not passing health messages by way of sit-coms. When I asked who he worked for, he said Bill Cosby. I said he surprised me, because Bill Cosby was one of the best examples I knew of how to deliver a health message without seeming to in the context of repartee in a sit-com.

---

AIDS as a world-class disease  
AIDS transmission by I.V. drug abusers  
Arson of the Ray brother's home  
Black & Hispanic statistics  
Commendable record of television in transmitting  
the AIDS message  
"Condomania"

Denial of access to public education  
Disproportionate partition of AIDS among  
Minorities  
Epidemic in the heterosexual population  
Exposure of bigotry on TV  
Gonorrhea, syphilis, chlamydia  
“Good sex”  
Homosexual & bisexual men  
How AIDS is transmitted  
How AIDS cannot be transmitted  
Human relationships  
Intercourse – rectal intercourse – vaginal  
Low-risk white, suburban population vs. high-risk  
urban minority population  
National AIDS awareness month  
National televised AIDS awareness test  
Neonatal AIDS  
Relationships that are loving & caring  
Relationships that are mutually respectful &  
thoughtful  
Research in “AIDS Awareness”  
“Sex as usual”  
Sexual content of TV programs  
Sexual responsibility  
Surveys by ABC, New York Daily News &  
The Washington Post  
Surveys by CBS, The New York Times  
Surveys by NBC, The Wall Street Journal  
Surveys by Roper, Louis Harris, & Gallup  
Television characters as role models for our  
children  
The sequellae of I.V. drug use  
Transmission of AIDS  
Trend toward monogamy  
Unplanned teenaged pregnancies as a measure of  
sexual activity  
Vaccine for AIDS

---

“An Early Frost”  
“An Enemy Among Us”  
“Cagney & Lacey”  
Columbia University  
“Cosby Show”  
Marcy Kelly  
“La Bamba”  
“L.A. Law”

Los Angeles Times  
Pogo  
Ray brothers  
"Roxanne"  
"St. Elsewhere"  
"The Golden Girls"  
"The Living Daylights"